

God's Emoji *Jeremiah 33:14-16* | 12/2/2018

On a typical smartphone, you can find a little Christmas tree, a gift-wrapped box and a Santa Claus. All are symbols of the Christmas season, tiny pictures used on social media, in text messages and in emails. The name for them? Emojis.

The prophet Jeremiah says that “a righteous Branch” will spring up for Jesse’s son, King David (v. 15). This branch is a colorful symbol for the season of Advent, and we can all picture it in our imaginations. Deep black roots, sturdy brown branches, tender green shoots — very much like what the prophet Isaiah says, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (11:1). We sing about it at Christmas, “Lo, how a rose e’er blooming, from tender stem hath sprung, of Jesse’s lineage coming, by faithful prophets sung.” The “righteous Branch” is nothing less than an emoji from God. So easy to see, and beautiful to sing about. But what in the world does it *mean*?

Emojis are really nothing new. Icons have been used in church paintings for centuries, and images such as “righteous Branch” go back thousands of years. In the Eastern tradition of the church, icons have been called “windows into heaven.” Luke, the author of the third gospel as well as the book of Acts, is venerated in some traditions as the original iconographer of the church. He is believed to have painted the face of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as the images of Peter and Paul.

Other symbols — ancient emojis, so to speak — were the fish symbol and even the cross itself — an image which emerged in many forms.

About 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah spoke of the restoration of Jerusalem and its leaders. “The days are surely coming,” says the Lord through the prophet, “when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David” (vv. 14-15).

There it is, God’s emoji: a righteous Branch, springing up for King David.

“He shall execute justice and righteousness in the land,” God says. “In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness’” (vv. 15-16).

In these verses, the prophet is talking about the leadership of the future — that’s the meaning of “righteous Branch.” This branch will emerge out of the family tree of King David, the greatest of Israel’s kings, the one who was — despite his flaws — “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). With his focus on justice and righteousness, this leader will truly restore the fortunes of the people. Bible scholar Patrick Miller says that his focus will not be simply on “abundance, productivity and partying.” Instead, he “will rightly render the affairs of the people and will lead them in their worship of the Lord.”

This new leader is, of course, Jesus Christ, born into the house and family of David (Luke 2:4). He is the one who teaches us righteousness, a word which is best defined as “right relationship.” Jesus wants us to show justice and righteousness in our relationships with each other and in our relationship with God.

Jesus is our righteous Branch. This is the meaning of Jesus, God’s emoji — righteousness. So, how can we apply this message of righteousness to our lives, as we follow him into the future?

For starters, we need to get clear *that Christian righteousness is not self-righteousness*. The Pharisees were self-righteous people, and Jesus was not a big fan of the Pharisees. Pastor Carey Nieuwhof sees a lot of Pharisees at work in the church today, and he offers a list of the things they tend to say:

1. *If he knew the Bible as well as I did, his life would be better.* “Yup, there it is,” says Nieuwhof. “Judgment and self-righteousness rolled up into a neat little package.” Reading the Bible is great, but we should never get smug and superior about knowing the Bible.
2. *I follow the rules.* Following rules is a good thing, but it is not what saves us. We are saved because Christ forgives us. Then, in gratitude for Christ’s mercy, we do our best to follow the rules.
3. *God listens to my prayers.* “Prayer is amazing,” says Nieuwhof. “And we do trust that God listens to our prayers. But ... prayer is not a button to be pushed nearly as much as it is a relationship to be pursued.”

There you have it: Self-righteousness versus Christian righteousness. When we show Christian righteousness, we read the Bible because we want to get closer to God. We try to follow the rules because we are thankful for Christ’s forgiveness. And we pray because we have a deep desire for a relationship with God.

Righteousness is all about right relationship. To be in right relationship with the people around us, we search for the image of God in each and every person — black and white, rich and poor, young and old, immigrant and native-born. We act as though Jesus is hidden inside the least of our brothers and sisters, because we remember that Jesus said that we are really serving him when we give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger and clothing to the naked (Matthew 25:35-36).

Right relationship is treating others as you would like to be treated. As Jesus grew up to say in the Sermon on the Mount, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). In this single verse, Jesus offers an emoji of what it means to execute justice and righteousness in the land.

But righteousness also has a divine dimension. Being in right relationship with God is not just going to worship and giving offerings, which the self-righteous Pharisees were very good at doing. It means paying attention to “the weightier matters of the law,” says Jesus, “justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23). It means practicing the kind of religion that James says is “pure and undefiled before God,” a religion that challenges people “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

When Bishop Michael Curry preached at the royal wedding last spring, he could have offered a sweet and sentimental sermon. But he surprised everyone by giving a message on civil rights and social justice, “in the name of our loving, liberating and self-giving God.”

Yes, he talked about love, but also about executing justice and righteousness in the land. In front of the royal family and an international audience, he lifted up God’s emoji, “a righteous Branch.”

“When love is the way,” said Bishop Curry, “then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more. When love is the way, there’s plenty good room — plenty good room — for all of God’s children.”

Bishop Curry was challenging us to follow Jesus, our new leader from God. With his “righteous Branch” as a central symbol for our lives, we discover what it means to be right with each other and with God.

God’s emoji always means righteousness. Righteousness, the gift **of** God empowered by love **from** God. The message is clear, in Advent and throughout the year.

Pastor Keith